

WASHINGTON POST

DATE: 14 JAN '69

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Flying Blind

One day the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its chairman, Senator Fulbright, are yelling bloody murder because the Secretary of State won't come before them in public session to defend our foreign policies. And the next day, or more precisely, tomorrow, the same Committee is holding secret hearings on Mr. Nixon's appointments for the two top jobs at the Department of State—Mr. William Rogers, for Secretary, and Mr. Elliot Richardson, for Under Secretary. It's enough to make you wonder how the Committee and its Chairman conceive their role—as a clandestine collaborator in the policy-making process or as an overt overseer, providing a forum by which the poor, benighted public might get, at the most, some vicarious sense of participation, or at the least, some slight feel for the men who will be holding two of the most powerful jobs in Mr. Nixon's Government.

The explanation offered on the Chairman's behalf is that Mr. Nixon has told his Cabinet members not to talk about policy matters before Inauguration Day and that this would leave them nothing to talk about in open sessions. "I'm trying to alter the deadly tradition of going through empty hearings with no meaning," Senator Fulbright explained.

Well we're not much for deadly tradition or empty hearings, either. But neither do we have much sympathy for this notion that if an appointee, or a job-holder, for that matter, is not talking Policy (whatever that grandiloquent word really means) he's not saying anything. Obviously, Mr. Rogers and Mr. Richardson aren't going to spell out their plans for ending the Vietnam War; they'd be silly to try to do so, at this stage, just as they would be silly to try to be explicit even after they take office. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee could spare itself a lot of anguish if it would stop insisting that this thing called Policy be

spelled out publicly, for all to see, for there are times when a Government caught up in difficult and delicate negotiations has to keep one or two things to itself.

But this is by no means the same as saying that nothing useful could be learned by putting these two men on the stand, publicly. Since both men are especially new to the foreign policy business, the hearings may offer less of an opportunity than usual for the sort of posturing the members of this Committee, particularly, seem to relish so: there would be less grounds for ringing broadsides against an Administration as yet unborn. There would be more of a premium on skillful, thoughtful, low-key interrogation, of a sort designed to give us some measure of these men—as prospective public servants, and as men. This is harder work, of course, and a lot less rewarding, politically, than the fancy cut and thrust of partisan attack against established Policy. But it is the sort of work the Committee ought to be doing, if it is to earn the right to argue later, as it has argued so loudly in the past, that somehow, the Senate and the public at large didn't get in on the take-off, and therefore have no responsibility for what happens once the new Administration is airborne. The simple fact of the matter is that Mr. Rogers and Mr. Richardson are less than a week away from having to execute this Nation's conduct of foreign affairs; if they cannot think of anything sensible and relevant to say out loud about the subject, and their general approach to it and their qualifications for their jobs at this point, you have to wonder whether they're going to be ready for work when next Monday rolls around. And if the Committee isn't prepared to let the public in on the questioning, however generalized it may turn out to be, it can hardly argue that it is exclusively the fault of the Executive Branch that the public, in these matters, is so often flying blind.